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Directorate  
of Intelligence

Intelligence Memorandum  
Office of European Analysis  
16 December 1992

APPROVED FOR RELEASE ☐  
DATE: 06-23-2010

## Serbian Elections: Democracy Will Have to Wait ☐

### Summary

Federal Prime Minister Milan Panic remains Serbian President Milosevic's only serious challenger for the Serbian presidency in this Sunday's presidential and republic elections. He is even ahead in some public opinion polls. Even though a run-off cannot be excluded, the electoral playing field is not even and recent Milosevic-backed media attacks on Panic have eroded the challenger's position. In the unlikely event that Panic and his allies defy the odds--and Milosevic's machinations--and win, the prospects for a quicker and less violent resolution to the conflict on the former Yugoslavia would improve modestly. We believe that Panic would be more averse to using force as a foreign policy instrument and willing to continue a dialogue with Croatian and ethnic-Albanian leaders in Kosovo. But we also believe that he would continue efforts to protect Serbs outside Serbia. A victory by Milosevic and his Socialist Party, on the other hand, probably would ensure the continued pursuit of a greater Serbia by force. It would likely also set the stage for longer-term polarization in Serbia and the region and internecine conflict. ☐

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### The Parties and the Campaign

Elections on 20 December will determine representation in the "Yugoslav" federal and Serbian and Montenegrin republic assemblies, as well as the presidencies of Serbia and Montenegro. Milosevic's Socialist Party currently dominates both the federal and Serbian republic legislatures, in part because the democratic opposition boycotted last Spring's election for federal Assembly. [redacted]

Opposition leaders are increasingly confident that they can capture control of the federal Assembly and reduce the Socialists' commanding majority in the Serbian Assembly. [redacted] opposition leaders also believe that there is a better than even chance of forcing Milosevic into a run-off on 4 January.

- Efforts by the opposition to portray Milosevic and the Socialists as Communist hacks who are destroying Serbia economically and isolating it internationally have had some success.
- Panic's optimism, openness, and willingness to confront Milosevic directly, have also found a receptive audience, as evidenced by the Prime Minister's competitive position in opinion polls.
- In addition, the opposition is playing up reports of corruption by Milosevic supporters in an effort to split labor support from the current government. [redacted]

Federal President Cosic reportedly believes that enough opposition candidates can be elected to the federal Assembly to form a coalition with Montenegrin members who oppose Milosevic.

- [redacted] many Montenegrin party leaders will support Panic because Milosevic is seen as having led Serbia and Montenegro into war, economic chaos, and international isolation.

[redacted]

- Montenegro's representatives this Fall were the deciding voice in preventing Panic from being ousted as federal Prime Minister in back-to-back no-confidence votes.

[redacted]

We are not as optimistic about Panic's and the opposition's chances, however.

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- Even though Serbians are looking to Panic to secure the removal of sanctions and ease Serbia's international isolation, many continue to view him as a carpetbagger who will not remain for long on the scene.
- Panic's eagerness to initiate a dialogue with ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, along with other non-Serbs, has led some to believe that Panic may "sell Serbia out" to gain a negotiated settlement. [redacted]

Panic's support within the federal military and other important Serbian institutions, moreover, appears less than solid.

- [redacted]
- Even though Cosic has rallied to Panic's defense on important occasions, and has distanced himself from fellow nationalist Milosevic, he stated in a recent interview, that he has done so "with little conviction."
- Although popular among students, Panic has had trouble gathering support from Belgrade's intelligentsia, which strongly prefers Cosic [redacted]

Milosevic and his party have many advantages in the current campaign, and control key levers of power to influence the election outcome and, if necessary, challenge a Panic victory.

- Milosevic still appears to enjoy widespread support in the countryside and in large industrial cities such as Nis and Kragujevac. The support of Serbia's workers has always been key to Milosevic's ability to maintain power, and we believe it unlikely that the UN-imposed sanctions will contribute to a sufficient erosion in support for Milosevic's in time for this round of elections. Milosevic still is able to buy off workers and ensure adequate supplies of key goods, although his ability to do this is declining.
- The Socialists are taking advantage of their control of Politika newspaper and Belgrade TV to dominate the "news" on state-run television, which has refused to run some opposition commercials. (The approximately 30 parties running in the election were promised equal time slots for television broadcasts, but all from the same studio.)

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- Finally, Serbia's powerful Interior Ministry militia force is solidly in the Milosevic camp. [redacted]

#### An Even Playing Field?

Milosevic and his supporters do not appear willing to let Panic gain the reins of power in Serbia under any circumstance. [redacted]

Opposition parties have already protested several irregularities in the election process.

- Many registered voters were removed from electoral lists. Serbian republic authorities gave eligible voters who did not participate in the May federal election or the November referendum less than a week to re-register. Write-in ballots, moreover, are open to fraud and intimidation [redacted]
- Milosevic early in the campaign launched a vehement anti-Panic barrage in the government-controlled press, which coincided with the Premier's sharp drop in the polls.
- In addition, Milosevic deprived the democratic opposition of a week of valuable campaign time by sending out contradictory rulings on the question of Panic's eligibility even to run for president. [redacted]

#### Implications of a Panic Victory

Milosevic probably realizes that his manipulation of the electoral process has already damaged Serbia's chances for international legitimacy, and probably would not hesitate to attempt to bring down a Panic government if the latter staged an electoral upset. At a minimum, Milosevic and his followers would work to undermine a fledgling Panic government covertly. Serbs in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo almost certainly would refuse allegiance and direction from Panic, and would rally to support Milosevic and/or Serbian ultranationalists. Even if Milosevic decided to accept the electoral verdict, there is a risk that the far right would launch internecine conflict and try to prevent Panic from showing flexibility on Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. [redacted]

If Panic and his allies manage to gain a tenuous hold on power, Cosic and Panic would be willing to show flexibility on key issues, especially if the international community reciprocated by easing sanctions or the terms of a peace settlement. [redacted]

- Panic almost certainly would attempt to curtail military support for the Bosnian Serbs, and would try to reduce ultranationalist paramilitary operations in Bosnia.

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- Panic and Cosic would continue negotiations with Croatian President Tudjman-- Cosic and Tudjman have already cut a deal on possession of the Prevlaka Peninsula--in an attempt to head off another round of fighting over Serb-controlled territory in Croatia.
- Panic also would probably accelerate efforts to defuse tension in Albanian-populated Kosovo by offering cultural and perhaps limited political autonomy.
- At the same time, no Serbian leader, most of all Panic, could neglect the rights of Serbs outside Serbia and expect to remain in power. Although Panic would probably not use armed force to protect Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia, he would continue to support the Serb regions financially and logistically.
- Likewise, Panic may try to grant limited autonomy to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, but he almost certainly would not hesitate to use armed force to stymie ethnic-Albanian efforts to secede from Serbia.

#### Implications of a Milosevic Victory

A victory by Milosevic and his Socialist Party probably would restore a temporary unity among Serbs, while increasing the chances for longer-term discord and spillover of the conflict. (A close Milosevic victory following first or second round voting, accompanied by opposition claims of electoral fraud, probably would trigger anti-regime demonstrations in Belgrade immediately following the election, but we believe that they would be quickly quelled.)

- A large Socialist victory, despite obvious manipulation of the electoral process, would likely re-legitimize the Milosevic regime within Serbia.
- Serbia's democratic opposition almost certainly would be marginalized, easing domestic political tension. Milan Panic would likely not be reelected as federal prime minister and federal President Cosic probably would be increasingly isolated.
- The republic's influential ultranationalist wing would be mollified for the time being; Vojislav Seselj's Radical Party might even form a coalition with Milosevic's Socialists in the republic assembly.
- A Milosevic victory also would allay concerns of radical Serb leaders in Croatia and Bosnia that Belgrade would "sell them out" to gain the lifting of sanctions.

Most importantly, a renewed mandate for Milosevic almost certainly would ensure the continued campaign to create a greater Serbia by force and, consequently, long-term instability in the Balkans.

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- An emboldened Milosevic regime almost certainly would be more likely to resist possible Western efforts to prevent the partition of Bosnia and Croatia, and probably would become less willing to countenance international admonitions on human rights and the lack of political pluralism in Serbia.
- Belgrade would continue supporting Bosnian Serb efforts to partition Bosnia and Herzegovina for eventual annexation to Serbia.
- Belgrade would continue to resist Croatian efforts to reestablish control over Serb-controlled regions of Croatia, forcing a standoff and possibly triggering another round of Serbo-Croatian fighting that could spread from the Hungarian border to the Adriatic.
- Efforts by the Milosevic regime to consolidate the Serbian confederation would increase tensions with Montenegro, which already suspects Belgrade of turning the republic into a vassal state.
- A consolidation of the Serbian confederation would encourage radicals--even without Milosevic's blessing--to attempt to settle the "Kosovo question" by initiating hostilities and ethnic cleansing operations in that volatile province. Similar operations would also be considered for the ethnic-Hungarian population in Vojvodina.

#### Long-Term Outlook

Domestic instability is likely to grow over time as economic sanctions and continued war weariness again begin to erode support for the Milosevic regime.

- The possible vanquishing of Serbia's democratic opposition improves the prospects that ultranationalists would eventually challenge Milosevic if he appears to waver in his quest for a greater Serbia.
- And if he does not, suffering among the population would eventually provoke violent opposition and a bid for peace by a successor regime.

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